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SIGNELIL

A TALE FROM THE CORNISH

AND OTHER BALLADS

BY

GEORGE BORROW

LONDON :

PRINTED FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION

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SIGNELIL

THE Lady her handmaid to questioning took :

“ Why dost thou so sickly and colourless look ? ”

But sorrow gnaws so sorely !

“ ’Tis little wonder if sickly I’m growing,

Malfred my lady !

So much am I busied with cutting and sewing.”

“ Erewhile was thy cheek as the blooming rose
red,

But now thou art pale, even pale as the dead.”

“ To conceal the truth longer ’tis vain to essay,
My gallant young master has led me astray.”

“ And if the young noble has led thee astray,
Say, what gave he thee for thy virtue in pay ? ”

“ He gave to me shoes were gold spangled all
o’er,
And them have I worn with affliction so sore.

“ He gave to me also of silk a soft shift,
And with sorrow most painful I’ve worn the fair
gift.

“ He gave me, Christ sain him ! a gold ring so
fine,
Whose match I can see on no finger of thine.”

“ But what will avail thee his presents of price,
If he thee will not wed before God and men’s
eyes ? ”

“ O, he to espouse me so often has vowed,
And rich presents beside upon me has bestowed.”

“ What will his vows help thee in secrecy spoke ?
To many a maid them he has made and has
broke.”

“ O, I on the gold harp will play me a tune,
And the knight to his presence will summon me
soon.”

With her fingers so tapering she struck the first
chord,
That heard, as he dozed in his bed, the young
lord.

The gallant young lord to his waiting-boy said :
“Go straight, and call hither my mother’s fair
maid.”

The bedside he stroked with so gentle an air :
“Dear heart, sit thee down, for thy weight it will
bear.”

“O no, by the Saints, I will never do that,
For there, noble Sir, I have ne’er before sat.”

“Though thou ne’er hast placed thee upon my
bedside,
Thou hast slept in my arms embraced many a
tide.

“My spouse thou shalt be, yea, my heart’s beloved
spouse,
And I in thine arms every night will repose.”

A TALE FROM THE CORNISH

IN Lavan's parish once of yore,
Dwelt on the spot called Tshei an Hor,
A loving couple, man and wife,
But poverty distressed their life.
And thus the man his wife address'd :
" I'll wander forth of work in quest ;
And you, my dearest, you can earn
Your living here till I return."

His home he leaves, and, far from gay,
Towards the East he took his way.
At length a farmer's dwelling reaching,
He enter'd it, for work besecching.

“What work canst do?” the farmer cried ;
“All kinds of work, Sir,” John replied.
Then straight they for a year agree,
Three pounds the wages were to be.

And when the year to end had come
The master paid him down the sum.
“John,” said his master, “here’s your fee ;
But if you’ll it return to me,
A point of wisdom I will teach you.”
Said John : “Give it me, I beseech you.”
“No, no, to give is not my way.”
“Take it,” said John, “and say your say.”
Quoth t’other : “This in memory hold :
Ne’er for the new road leave the old.”

They for another year agree,
The wages just the same to be ;
And when the year its end had reached,
The farmer forth the three pounds fetched.
“John,” said his master, “here’s your fee,
But if you’ll it return to me,

A point of wisdom I will teach you."

"Give it me, Sir, I do beseech you."

"For nought I will not speak, not I."

"Well, take it then," was John's reply.

Quoth t'other: "*Lodge not, for your life,
With an old man who's a young wife.*"

For yet a year they then agree,

The wages still the same to be.

And when the year to end had roll'd,

The three pounds out the master told.

"John," said the master, "here's your fee ;

But if you'll it return to me,

I'll the best point of wisdom learn you."

"For that, Sir, I'll the wage return you."

The farmer said: "*Take this advice,*

Ere striking once, bethink thee twice."

Now John would serve no longer there,

Home to his wife he would repair.

"Go not to-day," the farmer spake,

"To-morrow's my wife's day to bake ;

She shall for you prepare a cake
Home to your faithful wife to take."

The nine pounds in the loaf they hid,
And when John them adieu had bid,
The farmer cried : " I pray thee carry
This present home unto your deary ;
And as ye two there merry make,
Then, and not till then, part the cake."

John turned him homeward from the door ;
And when he reach'd St. Eler's Moor,
He met three Tre-ryn merchants there
Returning home from Excter.
" We're glad to see thee, John," they cried,
" Where hast thou been this long, long tide ? "
Says John : " Im just from service come,
And to my wife am journeying home."
" O travel with us," cried all three,
" And very welcome shalt thou be."

Before them two roads they behold ;
They took the new, John kept the old.

And as they passed by Keou Tshoy Un,
When they had just lost sight of John,
Thieves set upon them furiously,
Whereat they raised a doleful cry,
Which reaching John's ears on his rout,
"Murder!" and "Thieves!" he bellowed out.

His clamour scared the robber train,
Who from the merchants sped amain.
And when they came to Market Jew
They to their joy met John anew,
And cried: "What thanks we owe thee, John!
We had for certain, every one,
Been ruined people, but for thee,
Come with us, thou'lt most welcome be."

And when they reached the hostelrie
At which it was their wont to lie,
Quoth John: "The master I must view."
"The master! what with him wouldst do?"
They answered, "we've a mistress here,
And young enough she is, and fair;

To see the host, if you're inclined,
Him in the kitchen you will find."

Into the kitchen John he goes,
And sees the master of the house,
An ancient man who turned the spit.
"O, ho!" said John, "this house I quit;
No sleeping place of it I'll make,
But in the next will quarters take."
"Do not go yet," they cried all three,
"Stay, sup with us, thou'lt welcome be."

And now, with grief and shame, I say
That with a friar of orders grey
The mistress had contrived a plan
To murder the poor ancient man,
When sleep had bound the merchants fast,
And on their heads the crime to cast.

John in the next house that same night
Saw through a hole i' the wall a light.
So getting up and gently walking,
He heard the friar and woman talking.

The friar said : “ Against yon hole
My back I’ll set, for fear some soul
From the next house our deeds should spy.”

The hostess then most cruelly,
With a silk handkerchief she bore,
Murdered her ancient husband poor,
Strangled him did the accursed slut.
But meanwhile through the hole John cut
A round piece from the friar’s gown,
And then in bed again lay down.

At morn ran out the hostess crying
That murdered was her husband lying ;
And since nor man nor child had been,
Except the merchants, in the inn,
They should be hanged withouten fail ;
They thereupon were led to jail.
John quickly them a visit paid.
“ O, John ! we’ve evil luck,” they said ;
“ Last night the host was choked in bed,
And upon us the crime is laid.”

“Dear gentlemen,” was John’s reply,
“Beseech the Justice instantly
To cause them who the murder wrought
Into his presence to be brought.”

“But who knows who the deed has done?”
They faltered forth; then answered John:
“If I can’t prove who did it, I
Will hang for it most willingly.”

“Speak out,” they cried. Said John: “Last
night,
Being in bed, I saw a light;
I rose, as if I’d had a call—
There was a hole in the house wall,
’Gainst which his back a certain friar
Placed, thereby blinding it entire,
Lest, as he said, some curious eye
From the next house their deeds should spy.
I cut, meanwhile, to him unknown,
A large round piece from off his gown.
To prove that what I’ve said is true
I’ve in my pouch the piece to shew.”

The merchants then were soon set free ;
The murderers died on gallows tree.

All three depart from Market Jew,
Together with their comrade true,
Far as Kuz carn na Huila went,
And thence their ways lay different.
Now though the merchants earnest were
That John should with them home repair,
He steadfastly refused their plea,
Longing his wife and home to see.

When of the merchants he lost sight
He lounged away his time till night.
He'd fain know whether, while he roved
Abroad, his consort faithful proved.

Arrived, he listened at the door,
And heard a man's voice, he was sure,
Within the bed ; his knife he drew,
Resolved to slay the guilty two.
But soon remembering the advice,
"*Ere striking once, bethink thee twice,*"

In hurry from the door he strode,
But soon returning knocked aloud.

“ In name of God, who’s there ? ” she cried ;
“ ’Tis I am here, wife,” John replied.
(“ Now in the name of blest Marie,
Whom heard I in her company ? ”)
“ If John thou art, pray enter free.”
“ First bring the light here,” answered he.
’Twas brought, he stepped the threshold o’er.
Quoth he : “ On coming to the door
I heard a man’s voice in the bed.”
“ Ah, Johnny, when away you sped
In distant parts for work to roam,
I then with child was three months gone ;
In bed there lies a comely boy,
Unto us both he’ll be a joy.”

Said John, “ I’ve something to disclose.
My master, when I left his house,
Gave me this cake I have in hand,
And with it gave the strict command

When I with thee should merry make
Then and not till then it to break.
I'll now accomplish what he bade,
Mayhap we've wherefor to be glad."

They broke the cake in anxious haste,
The nine pounds in it, lo ! were placed.
They took the money, ate the bread,
And I for truth have heard it said
No quarrel e'er or noisy word
'Twixt them from that time forth occur'd.

Now, Gentles all, my tale is done,
I hope it has your favour won !

SIR VERNER AND DAME INGEBORG

IN Linholm's house

The swains they were drinking and making
carouse.

*The Dames ne'er could so gallant a prisoner
keep in.*

The swains they drank deep and they made
themselves gay,

And so did Sir Verner in prison that lay.

Dame Ingeborg woke, and she lifts up her eyes :
“ O, which of my maidens doth sing in that
guise ? ”

“ O, none of your maidens can sing in such
guise,

'Tis Sir Verner who's singing, in durance he lies.”

Dame Ingeborg straightway two servants
addressed :

“ To come to my presence Sir Verner request.”

In through the portal Sir Verner he strode,
And up to receive him Dame Ingeborg stood.

To the cushion Dame Ingeborg points with a
smile :

“ Go thither, Sir Verner, and rest thee awhile. .

“ Now hark thou, Sir Verner, what I to thee say :
I beg thou wilt sing me a pretty love lay.”

“ A love lay I’ve never learnt up to this hour,
But I’ll sing to oblige thee the best in my
power.”

Sir Verner began, and he sang such a lay,
That soon in deep slumber Dame Ingeborg lay.

The Dames and the maids fell to sleep and to
doze,

Dame Ingeborg sank to a peaceful repose.

Sir Verner he glanced then so cautiously round,
The keys great and small in a nook he has found.

To the door hied Sir Verner as fast as he might,
He forgot to bid Dame Ingeborg a good-night.

When out of the castle himself he perceived,
His voice in a ditty again he upheaved.

Sir Verner he waved up his hat with delight :
“ Dame Ingeborg bid ye a very good night !

“ And hear thou, Sir Warden, who stand’st on
thy watch,

Of my ditty the burden I pray thee to catch.

“ She’d this e’en not have taken a bushel of gold,
Now no penny for me shall she ever behold.”

So fast to the door went Sir Verner the knight,
He forgot to bid Damsel or Lady good-night.

THE HEDDEBY SPECTRE ¹

AT evening fall I chanced to ride,
My courser to a tree I tied.

So wide thereof the story goes.

Against a stump my head I laid,
And then to slumber I essay'd.

So wide thereof the story goes.

As soon as sleep had closed my eye,
The murdered man to me drew nigh.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“And if thy race to mine belongs,
I call thee to avenge my wrongs.

So wide thereof the story goes.

¹ An earlier, and utterly different, version of this ballad was printed in *Romantic Ballads*, 1826, pp. 37-39. Borrow afterwards described this earlier version as “a paraphrase.”

“ And thou to Heddeby shalt ride,
For there my kith and kin reside.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ My father dwells there, and my mother,
There dwell my sister and my brother.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ There Kirsten dwells, my lovely wife,
And it was she who took my life.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ Her sleeping husband stifled she,
With aid of cursed beldames three.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ Then in a truss of hay concealed,
They brought me forth to this wide field.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ The page I loved the best of all,
Now rides upon my courser tall.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ Eats daily with my silver knife,
And sleeps with Kirsten fair, my wife.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ He sitteth highest at the board,
My children tremble at his word.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ To them he gives so little bread,
And mocks them now that I am dead.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ He rides about the forest grounds,
And hunts the red deer with my hounds.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ Each time the caitiff slays a deer,
He wakes me in my grave so drear.

So wide thereof the story goes.

“ But if I to him once repair,
With him 'twill sorely, sorely fare.”

So wide thereof the story goes.

FROM GOUDELI

YESTERE'EN when the bat, and the owl, and his
mate,
Were holding discourse their small matters
about ;
And the sun, that the wee little stars might
shine out,
Had extinguished the lamp of his lustre so
great.

A shepherd exclaimed : “ O 'twas folly that I
My love should bestow upon one never kind,
Upon Siris the lovely, whose cold, cruel mind,
Would suffer unmoved a true lover to die.

“ Often times, when our flocks on the common
did browse,

I’d approach her to pour in her ear my fond
vows,

But unto her companions to haste she was
sure.

O, light of my eyes! wouldst thou render me
blest,

And wouldst grant me two kisses on thy snowy
breast,

I swear that each one should an hour endure ! ”

PEASANT SONGS OF SPAIN

I.

WHEN Jesu our Redeemer
To him the twelve did call,
By threes and fours he called them,
Till they were mustered all.

And when they all were mustered,
'Twas thus to them he spake :
“ O which of ye, my children,
Will perish for my sake? ”

Then, gazing on each other,
They stood abashed and still ;
All save Saint John the Baptist,
And Peter of the Hill.

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“ We’ll die for thee, O Jesus,
 Upon to-morrow’s morn.”
For him died John the Baptist,
 And suffered pain and scorn.

2.

There stands a stone, a rounded stone,
 ’Midst ocean’s surges hoary,
On which sweet Jesus set his foot
 When mounting to his glory.

There grows a rose, a blooming rose,
 ’Midst ocean’s briny waters,
That o’er may pass, to hear the mass,
 Havanah’s dusky daughters.

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